

UNCLASSIFIED

PAGES 426-469  
INCLUSIVE

OF

HISTORY OF THE PACIFIC AIR FORCES  
1 Jul 74-31 Dec 75

#295  
REPRODUCTION APPROVAL GRANTED:  
28 JUN 1978 by CINCPACAF HO-  
1tr, 28 June 1978

*Shirley A. Streck, 29 June 1978*  
SHIRLEY A. STRECK, J042511

CONT NR. TS-HQA-76-135

79 Copy R-1  
OASD(PA)DFOISR 78-TS

ENCLOSURE (4)

End (4)

UNCLASSIFIED

426

### The Mayaguez Affair

*The Mayaguez affair, he [Cambodian Deputy Premier Ieng Sary] implied, was all a horrible mistake. . . . He contended that a "local commander" had taken it upon himself to seize the ship. "I did not know of the capture until I heard the news on the U.S. radio," he said. The commander was summoned to Phnom Penh but did not arrive until the next day. It took Sary and his colleagues three hours to decide to release the ship, and then they made a critical error. "We did not broadcast our decision until the following morning," said Sary. By then, the U.S. attack was under way.<sup>1</sup>*

(U) Whatever the truth to this contention, it proved to be costly to both Cambodia and the United States. In two days of action, the month-old Communist country lost nine naval patrol boats. It also suffered air strikes on the Ream naval base and airfield, and on the Kompong Som port, railroad yard, and petroleum refinery, as well as air strikes and naval gunfire on Koh Tang, taking many casualties. The United States listed 15 known dead, three missing and presumed dead, and 49 wounded in direct combat action at Koh Tang, plus 23 dead in a related accident. Three Air Force helicopters were shot down on the island, and a number of other aircraft were damaged.

(U) The Mayaguez incident was ". . . a daring show of nerve and steel by a nation whose will, after Vietnam [and Cambodia], had come under question around the globe," observed Newsweek.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, Cambodia itself ". . . furnished the provocation, seizing the unarmed ship in disputed waters. . . . [President] Ford's answer was a classic show of gunboat diplomacy. . . . It was swift

---

1. James Pringle, interview of Ieng Sary at the conference of nonaligned nations in Lima, Peru, in Sep 75, Newsweek, 22 Sep 75, p 39.

2. Newsweek, 26 May 75, p 16.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

427

and tough--and it worked," "It might also be said," opined another observer,<sup>1</sup> "it was nice of the Cambodians to provide Ford with such a heaven-sent opportunity to display American decisiveness. Only the nitpickers would point out that it cost 41 American lives to rescue 40 Mayaguez crewmen, including the captain."

### The Seizure

(U) The Mayaguez, an old 10,485-ton cargo ship, was enroute from Hong Kong to Sattahip, Thailand, with a mixed load of containers. The vessel, under American registry and owned by Sea-Land Service, Inc. of Menlo Park, New Jersey, was carrying 274 containers (107 routine commercial cargo, 77 military cargo, and 90 empty; the 77 containers of military cargo consisted of 2 of mail, 26 of machine parts, supplies, and replacement equipment, 3 of subsistence supplies, 8 of commissary supplies, and 38 of post exchange items). At about 120720Z May 1975,\* a Cambodian gunboat fired warning shots across the bow of the Mayaguez, and then a rocket over the deck containers. The skipper, Captain Charles T. Miller, ordered the ship to slow to maneuvering speed, because, as he later related to newsmen, "Once a man fires across your bow, international law says he can sink you if you don't obey." He was also aware that the gunboat's rockets could rip big holes in the ship's hull. The Mayaguez was stopped and boarded by the gunboat crew, in naval uniform, at a point some 60 nautical miles from the mainland, and about 7 nautical

---

\*For consistency, times have been adjusted to "Zulu" or GMT, add 7 hours for Cambodia and Thailand local time, or subtract 4 hours for EDT (Washington time).

1. Keyes Beech of the Chicago Daily News, in reviewing The Four Days of Mayaguez by Roy Rowan, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1975, in the Honolulu Sunday Star-Bulletin & Advertiser, 5 Oct 75, p C-12. This book, based on personal interviews of the Mayaguez captain and crew, naval commanders, and President Ford, provides an excellent account of the incident, especially from the viewpoint of the captives. Cited hereafter as: Rowan, The Four Days of Mayaguez.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

428

miles south-southwest of the disputed\* Poulo Wai islands (see map, Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> (Map and photos in Command Data, Vol. II.)

(U) A mayday distress signal was picked up by several other ships in the area and relayed to Jakarta, Indonesia.<sup>+</sup> Repeated attempts to raise the ship's radio from about 120900Z were unsuccessful, and were terminated at about 121000Z. The emergency message was passed on to the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, and the Defense Attaché, immediately notified Washington of the fact at 120903Z.<sup>2</sup>

(U) It was shortly before dawn in Washington when the first "flash" of the ship's seizure was received in the State Department Operations Center. It wasn't until an hour later, at 121015Z, that Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger was awakened with the news. Lt. Gen. Brent Skowcroft, USAF, the President's deputy national security adviser, learned of the seizure when he arrived at the White House at 121100Z. President Ford was told about it at 121140Z (7:40 AM EDT), when he came down from his residential quarters. At that point, about all the Pentagon could do was to order Air Force and Navy planes from Thailand and the Philippines to attempt to locate the ship--and maintain surveillance.<sup>3</sup>

---

\*Ownership of the Wai islands had been in dispute between Vietnam and Cambodia for many years. They were seized by the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam in Jun 75, after a week of heavy fighting. However, in Aug 75, the islands were returned to Cambodia.

+The radio operator said later that he broadcast signals for 10 hours after the Cambodians seized the ship, because the radio room was not entered.

1. New York Times, 16 May 75, p 1; Newsweek, 26 May 75, p 16; Rowan, The Four Days of Mayaguez, p 33.

2. Msg (U), USDAO Jakarta to DIRNSA, subj: Lateral CRITIC, 121055Z May 75, Doc 249.

3. Newsweek, 26 May 75, pp 16-27.

UNCLASSIFIED

Initial Reactions

At 121200Z May 1975, almost five hours after the boarding, the National Military Command Center (NMCC) directed an immediate launch of reconnaissance aircraft, to obtain photo coverage of the ship. The point of seizure was given as 9°48'N/102°53'E. The Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet (CINCPACFLT) ordered the Commander, Seventh Fleet (COMSEVENTHFLT) to direct his nearest ship to proceed to the area "at best speed to provide assistance as practicable."<sup>1</sup> The JCS followed this telephoned directive with a message to CINCPAC at 121437Z, confirming the order to launch reconnaissance aircraft. It was noted that the ship was proceeding under its own power, presumably to Kompong Som (Sihanoukville), and that the radio operator, in a room not occupied by the Cambodians, was still transmitting messages.<sup>2</sup> CINCPAC was also asked to obtain photo coverage, for intelligence purposes, of Phnom Penh and Kompong Som at first light on the 13th,<sup>3</sup> with RF-4C aircraft of PACAF's 432 TFW based at Udorn.

) After stopping and boarding the *Mayaguez*, the Cambodians, none of whom spoke English, gestured that they were looking for arms. After a quick search, the majority of the ship's crew were transferred to the gunboat, and the remainder stayed on board to operate the vessel.<sup>4</sup>

(U) At about 121300Z, with night falling, the ship dropped anchor along Poulo Wai, and other armed Cambodians came on board. Captain Miller's captors ordered him in

---

1. Msg (S-GDS-83), CINCPACFLT to COMSEVENTHFLT, subj: Boarding of American Flag Ship (S), 121337Z May 75; retransmitted by CINCPAC to CINCPACAF, USSAG/7AF & 13AF, 121502Z May 75, Doc 250.

2. Msg (S-GDS-83), JCS to CINCPAC, subj: CRITIC (S), 121437Z May 75, Doc 251.

3. Msg (S-GDS-83), JCS to CINCPAC & CINCSAC, subj: Boarding of American Flag Ship (U), 121944Z May 75.

4. Msg (S/NOFORN-GDS-83), USS *Henry B. Wilson* to COMUSSAG/7AF, subj: Debrief of *Mayaguez* Crew (U), 171000Z May 75 (Atch 5 to Hist, USSAG/7AF & JCRC, Apr-Jun 75).

sign language to proceed to Wharf 2 in Kompong Som port on the mainland. Miller told them his radar was out (which was true) and that he could not navigate. At 122300Z (6:00 AM) the next morning, the Cambodians indicated on charts that they wanted the Mayaguez to proceed to Koh (island) Tang, 25 nautical miles to the northeast. After stalling as long as he could, Miller moved the vessel at half speed, still hoping, as he later recalled, that U.S. planes would come to his rescue. However, by 130700Z, they arrived off Koh Tang and dropped anchor. There, the crew was put into fishing boats and taken to a cove on the island. All night long, they heard reconnaissance aircraft flying overhead.<sup>1</sup>

(U) Meanwhile, at noon on the 12th (121600Z May 1975) in Washington, President Ford convened an urgent meeting of the National Security Council in the Cabinet Room. Secretary Kissinger, "taking command of the session," (according to a Newsweek account) argued that what was at stake went far beyond the seizure of a U.S. vessel. For "both domestic and international reasons," he contended, "the U.S. had to react--and hard." The closest warships, already ordered to the area, were the destroyer-escort USS Harold E. Holt and the refrigerated store ship Vega (AF-59), both about a day's sail away. The attack aircraft Carrier USS Coral Sea, steaming for Australia to commemorate the anniversary of the World War II battle of its namesake, was diverted to join them.<sup>2</sup> The White House quickly released the following statement:<sup>3</sup>

*We have been informed that a Cambodian naval vessel has seized an American merchant ship on the high seas and forced it to the port of Kompong Som [this destination was a premature and erroneous assumption]. The President has met with the National Security Council. He considers this seizure an act of piracy. He has instructed the State Department to demand the immediate release of the ship. Failure to do so would have the most serious consequences [emphasis added].*

- 
1. Newsweek, 26 May 75, pp 16-27.
  2. Ibid.
  3. New York Times, 13 May 75, p 1.

Recovery Actions Instituted. CINCACFLT sent another message to COMSEVENTHFLT at 121812Z, soon after the National Security Council meeting, directing the Coral Sea and its escorts to steam at full speed to the vicinity of 9°20'N/102°40'E in the Gulf of Siam, some 50 miles southwest of Poulo Wai. Additionally, he ordered the Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) Alpha on Okinawa to prepare to get underway to support the operation.<sup>1</sup> A U.S. Navy P-3 Orion from Cubi Point spotted the Mayaguez on its radar screen at 121430Z, and made a positive identification at 130116Z (8:16 AM). She was dead in the water, approximately two miles northeast of Poulo Wai,<sup>2</sup> but was soon observed to be underway and heading north. Five hours later, at 130625Z, the ship was again stopped and apparently preparing to anchor, one mile north of Koh Tang. Reconnaissance planes, flying low, drew small arms fire from troops on the ship.<sup>3</sup>

(U) In Kansas City, Missouri, on the 13th, meanwhile, Secretary Kissinger said at a news conference that all diplomatic efforts to obtain release of the Mayaguez and crew would be exhausted before any other action was taken. However, the United States had "other options to diplomacy" if the Cambodians ignored demands for release of the ship. "I don't want to comment on the motivations of the Cambodians in their action," said Kissinger. "We are not even sure if the action was by the government or a local commander. . . . we consider the incident a seizure of a ship conducting peaceful trade in international waters."<sup>4</sup>

---

1. Msg (S-GDS-83), CINCACFLT to COMSEVENTHFLT, subj: Boarding of U.S. Flag Ship (S), 121812Z May 75; retransmitted by CINCPAC to CINCPACAF & COMUSSAG/7AF, 130015Z May 75, Doc 252.

2. Msg (S-GDS-83), CTG 72.3 to CTF 72, et al., subj: Boarding of American Flag Ship SITREP 7 (S), 130210Z May 75; retransmitted by CINCPAC to CINCPACAF, 130914Z May 75, Doc 253.

3. Msg (S-GDS-83), CTG 72.3 to CTF 72, et al., subj: Boarding of American Flag Ship SITREP 10 (S), 130715Z May 75; retransmitted by CINCPAC to CINCPACAF, 130832Z May 75, Doc 254.

4. United Press International, Kansas City Mo., 14 May 75.

(U) The People's Republic of China seemed unable (or perhaps unwilling) to exert any influence on the new Cambodian government in this incident. Vice Premier Teng Hsiao-ping said in Paris on 13 May that, "If the United States intervenes, there is nothing we can do." Teng told reporters he was unaware of China's reported role as intermediary in diplomatic negotiations between the United States and Cambodia to obtain release of the ship.<sup>1</sup>

Efforts to Contain Ship Movement. Meanwhile, the JCS was issuing confirming instructions to CINCPAC on 131017Z to maintain fighter and gunship cover over the Mayaguez.<sup>2</sup>

*Attempt to effect release of this ship or at least prevent her movement into port. Overflight of the gunboats is authorized, together with firing in front of or to the side of the gunboats as necessary. Firing on the gunboats is specifically prohibited. Disregard of the 12-mile limit is authorized if necessary.*

Acting on the basis of a previous telephone call, however, Lt. Gen. John J. Burns, COMUSSAG/7AF, had already launched two F-4s from Udorn at approximately 130720Z to "interdict progress" of the ship toward Kompong Som. Subsequently, four A-7s and two F-111s of PACAF's 388 TFW and 347 TFW, respectively, were launched from Korat. Follow-up fighter flows were established with Udorn F-4s, in flights of two, spaced at 30-minute intervals.<sup>3</sup> An A-7D flight fired the first ordnance, eight 2.75-inch rockets, into the water fore and aft of the Mayaguez at about 4:00 PM (130900Z), as a signal for the ship not to get underway

- 
1. Baltimore Sun, 14 May 75, p 2.
  2. Msg (S-GDS-83), JCS to CINCPAC, subj: Confirmation of Telephone Instructions (U), 131017Z May 75, Doc 255.
  3. Msg (C-GDS-81), USSAG/7AF to CINCPAC, subj: SS Mayaguez SITREP 001 as of 130930Z May 75 (U), 131040Z May 75, Doc 256.



from her anchorage off Koh Tang.<sup>1</sup>

At dusk, 131024Z, a small fishing-type vessel was observed moving from the ship toward Koh Tang. It appeared to have Caucasian personnel on board. Later, AC-130 gunship crews of the 388 TFW reported that their sensors showed the stack of the ship was still hot, but steadily cooling, indicating that she was not about to move under her own power.<sup>2</sup>

The JCS then recommended further actions that CINCPAC forces could take to prevent the ship from being moved to the mainland:<sup>3</sup>

*The key immediate objective is to prevent the SS Mayaguez from sailing toward Kompong Som. Smoke from startup of boilers, raising of the anchor on the forecastle (if confirmed down), and increased heating of the stack detected by infrared in an AC-130 gunship are some of the indications that the ship is about to get underway. Use of riot control agents and/or gunfire necessary to disable ship with minimum risk of lives (without risking sinking of ship) authorized as necessary. If ship starts to sail under own steam, this virtually assures there are Americans still aboard. If effort is made to tow, it is likely Americans have been removed. In event of towing, speed will be slow and more time will be available for action. Also, the tugboat can be a prime target as necessary. Request immediate notification of any indication of preparation to sail.*

The captain of the USS Harold E. Holt, which was still steaming at full speed toward Koh Tang, was told to be prepared, on arrival, to move the Mayaguez with his own

---

1. Msgs (S-GDS-83), PATRON 4 to AIG 7050, subj: Boarding of American Flag Ship SITREP 12 (S), 131019Z May 75, Doc 257; 388 TFW to CINCPACAF, subj: Khmer Seizure of Mayaguez (U), 170920Z May 75, Doc 258.

2. Msgs (C-GDS-81), USSAG/7AF to CINCPAC, subj: SS Mayaguez SITREP 006, 131024Z; 010, 131245Z; 015 (U), 131615Z May 75.

3. Msg (S-GDS-83), JCS to CINCPAC, subj: Actions Reference SS Mayaguez (U), 131341Z May 75, Doc 259.

resources, or to disable her if necessary.<sup>1</sup>

#### Retaking Ship with USAF Security Police Considered

The military moved quickly to assemble an assault force at U-Tapao. The JCS ordered CINCPAC to move all available helicopter assets in Thailand, plus 75 USAF security policemen from Nakhon Phanom, to that base. In addition, the Military Airlift Command (MAC) was to transport two Marine reinforced platoons from Cubi Point Naval Air Station in the Philippines to U-Tapao. An Okinawa-based Marine battalion was placed on advanced deployability posture for movement to U-Tapao via MAC airlift.<sup>2</sup>

The first HH-53 helicopter, call sign Jolly Green 32, was launched from Korat for U-Tapao at 131243Z May 1975, and the next three HH-53s (Jolly Green 01 flight) took off from Nakhon Phanom. Soon after, Knife 01-3, in the flight of the first three CH-53s which took off from Nakhon Phanom between 131333Z and 131409Z, crashed about 36 miles from that base.<sup>3</sup> Knife 2-1, alerted of the crash, launched for U-Tapao at 131505Z with a doctor on board. At the scene by 131547Z (10:47 PM), the doctor confirmed that there was no chance of survivors. The wreckage was burning and could not be immediately searched.<sup>4</sup> Four crew members and 19 passengers (18 security policemen and one ground crew) perished in the crash.

Before the Marine assault force could be assembled at U-Tapao, COMUSSAG/7AF considered using Air

---

1. Msg (S-GDS-83), CINCPAC to CINCPACFLT, subj: Tasking for USS Harold E. Holt (U), 131359Z May 75.

2. Msg (S-GDS-83), JCS to CINCPAC, subj: Khmer Seizure of Mayaguez (U), 131610Z May 75, Doc 260.

3. Msgs (C-GDS-81), USSAG/7AF to CINCPAC & CINCPACAF, subj: SS Mayaguez SITREP 011 as of 131348Z May 75 (U), 131420Z May 75, Doc 261, and SITREP 014 as of 131511Z May 75 (U), 131545Z May 75, Doc 262.

4. Msg (U), 3 ARRG to AIG 8712, subj: Rescue Opening/Closing Rpt; 13 May 75, 140530Z May 75, Doc 263.

Force security policemen (SPs) based in Thailand to recover the Mayaguez and crew. The plan included dropping riot control agents (RCA) on the ship to immobilize anyone still on board. Following this, 125 SPs, two explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) personnel, two paramedics, and one U.S. Army interpreter would be helilifted to the ship to seize control. All CH-53 transport helicopters available in Thailand (there were ten assigned to PACAF's 21 SOS at Nakhon Phanom) would be used. Additionally, with the exception of two on ground alert at Korat, all available HH-53 rescue helicopters (seven) of the 40 ARRS (MAC) would be used for the operation.\* A helicopter flow was set up to carry the entire 130-man force on board in a single lift. Two HH-53s would be kept in orbit above the action on a continual basis.<sup>1</sup>

COMUSSAG noted that the aluminum containers which filled the deck of the ship (see photo, Fig 2) could not support the weight of helicopters for landing, so offloading would have to be done from a hover position. Further, a 3-foot space between containers had to be taken into consideration. Six CH-53s and four HH-53s were operationally ready at the time. Other helicopters would be deployed to U-Tapao as they were made ready to fly. Two EC-130s (7 ACCS, Clark AB) for airborne command and control, and two HC-130s (56 ARRS, Korat RTAFB) for aerial refueling, were also scheduled for action. Security police detachments from bases within Thailand were to deploy to U-Tapao via helicopters and C-130s. All SP units would be under the command of the 56 SOW SPS commander. Colonel Loyd J. Anders, Jr., Deputy Commander for Operations, 56 SOW, was to be the overall mission commander, working through the SAC command post at U-Tapao.<sup>2</sup>

---

\* (U) The CH-53 and HH-53 differed in that the latter was re-configured to a combat crew recovery mission, with a mid-air refueling probe, foam-filled tanks, and three 7.62mm miniguns (two waist and one tail). The CH-53 was not air refuelable, and had only two waist miniguns.

1. Msg (S/NOFORN-GDS-83), USSAG/7AF to 347 TFW, et al., subj: SS Mayaguez Surveillance Operation (U), 131748Z May 75, Doc 264.

2. Ibid.

A first-light arrival (approximately 132300Z May 1975; 6:00 AM local) was planned, with C-130s proceeding to their designated orbits and establishing communications with each other and with COMUSSAG (through the 7AF TACC). The airborne mission commander (AMC) in the airborne command and control center (ABCCC) EC-130 would control all local operations. Because of international implications, however, command and control was to be maintained by COMUSSAG/7AF, who would be acting under the direction of the NMCC.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the Acting Chairman of the JCS (ACJCS), USAF General David C. Jones,\* in a conference call with Lt. Gen. Burns and Lt. Gen. William G. Moore, USAF (the CINCPAC Chief of Staff), ordered that certain actions be taken to isolate the island of Koh Tang. An execute message was subsequently issued at 131905Z:<sup>2</sup>

*It is desired that we isolate island of Kas [Koh] Tang by turning boats away that are approaching the island or by turning back any boats that attempt to leave and give evidence of heading for the mainland. Gunfire across the bow is one method that can be used. In view of the direct communications contact with the on-scene commander, immediate report on any movements should be available to Washington; therefore, the decision to fire on or sink any boats resides in Washington. It is particularly important to get maximum information on any outgoing boat to determine if there are Americans aboard and to report such when requesting authority to sink. Although this will be difficult to accomplish, deck loading probably will be required on the small boats—as they did in taking personnel, believed to be Americans, from the ship to the island.*

This message was followed seven minutes later by another from the ACJCS, executing movement of a Marine battalion

---

\*The Chairman, Gen George S. Brown, was temporarily out of Washington.

1. Ibid.

2. Msg (TS-GDS-85), JCS to CINCPAC, subj: Actions Reference SS Mayaguez (U), 131905Z May 75, Doc 265.

from Okinawa to U-Tapao on MAC aircraft.<sup>1</sup>

General Burns briefed General Moore that the two platoons of Marines from Cubi Point would not arrive at U-Tapao until 132135Z. The shortest reasonable ground time required to brief, prepare, and reload the troops was about an hour and a half. Then, the first helicopter wave could be airborne at 132305Z. Enroute time was calculated at one hour and 45 minutes, so the earliest arrival time of the Marines over the Mayaguez was estimated at 140050Z. Alternatively, a USAF 100-man SP team could be inserted at 132244Z. "I believe the Marines are the preferred troops for this [reboarding] mission," admitted Burns, and, if the two-hour differential were acceptable, he recommended their use. The Marine battalion from Okinawa, however, was not scheduled to arrive at U-Tapao until 140900Z; this meant that the first wave of 200 Marines could not be landed on Koh Tang until 141215Z. Last light was 141143Z. A night insertion, at the slow build-up rate of 200 troops every four hours (necessitated by the helicopter recycle time), was tactically questionable. Burns recommended that if a landing on the island was necessary [it later proved not to be], it be planned for dawn the following day, the 15th.<sup>2</sup>

Wisely, it was decided to use the Marine re-boarding force. At 132051Z, CINCPAC ordered COMUSSAG/7AF to execute the latter's plan of 131748Z, above, but with a "USMC GSF [ground security force] personnel" substituted for the "USAF security police." Another important change was that command and control would be maintained by CINCPAC (not COMUSSAG/7AF), "acting under direction from JCS (NMCC)."<sup>3</sup>

---

1. Msg (S-GDS-83), JCS to CINCPAC, subj: Actions Reference SS Mayaguez (U), 131912Z May 75.

2. Msg (S-GDS-83), COMUSSAG/7AF to CINCPAC, subj: SS Mayaguez (U), 131955Z May 75, Doc 266.

3. Msg (S-GDS-83), CINCPAC to COMUSSAG/7AF & CINCPACFLT, subj: SS Mayaguez Ops (U), 132051Z May 75, Doc 267.

Intelligence Estimate on Koh Tang

Meanwhile, IPAC (Intelligence Center, Pacific), at Camp Smith in Honolulu, sent an intelligence report at 132144Z to all concerned, estimating a maximum of one company (90 to 100 men), reinforced with a heavy weapons squad, to be on Koh Tang. Estimated weaponry of such a force was one 82mm mortar, one 75mm recoilless rifle, two 30cal machine guns, one 12.7mm machine gun, and two B40/41 rocket launchers, in addition to weapons on the patrol boats (five armed boats were observed in the area).<sup>1</sup> Indications that a sizeable armed force was on shore came from AC-130 gunship sensors: At least three gun emplacements on the beach, spread out in a 100-yard curve;<sup>2</sup> four probable jeeps spotted under foliage;<sup>3</sup> six small vehicles on the south side of the island;<sup>4</sup> sporadic anti-aircraft fire directed at reconnaissance aircraft.

USAF Air Strikes on Cambodian Naval Craft

It was 5:45 in the morning on the 14th (132245Z) when CINCPAC verbally authorized Spectre (AC-130 gunship) to fire near three patrol boats attempting to leave the Koh Tang area. The boats were successfully turned back, but, shortly, two of them made another run for the mainland. They were again turned back by AC-130 and F-111 strikes. All three boats then headed for the Mayaguez. Two secured alongside, and the third broke for the mainland. F-4s fired in front of the fleeing boat, to no avail. Half an hour later, A-7s expended RCA in the gunboat's path but it continued on course. At 7:14 AM (140014Z), CINCPAC ordered the boat sunk, as no personnel were visible above deck. A-7s fired on the boat's stern

---

1. Msg (S/NOFORN-XGDS-2), COMIPAC to AIG 8724, subj: SS Mayaguez Seizure (U), 132144Z May 75, Doc 268.

2. Msg (C-GDS-81), 388 TFW to AIG 913, subj: SS Mayaguez Surveillance Operations/SEA AirOps for 13 May 75 (U), 132130Z May 75, Doc 269.

3. Msg (C-GDS-81), USSAG/7AF to CINCPAC, subj: SS Mayaguez SITREP 023 as of 140210Z May 75 (C), 132310Z May 75, Doc 270.

4. Msg (C-GDS-81), USSAG/7AF to CINCPAC & CINCPACAF, subj: SS Mayaguez SITREP 021 as of 141908Z May 75 (C), 131945Z May 75, Doc 271.

until it stopped, caught fire, and started sinking at 140022Z. This was the first destruction of a Cambodian naval vessel in the Mayaguez incident.<sup>1</sup>

At 11:04 AM (140404Z), CINCPAC, with JCS approval, cleared all aircraft to attack and sink any boat around Koh Tang. None were to enter or leave the area. Three boats were spotted and sunk almost immediately. As the operation continued, three other gunboats were located and destroyed. In all, seven Cambodian small naval craft were destroyed by USAF tactical air on the 14th (3 by A-7Ds, 3 by F-4s, 1 by AC-130), and two more by the USN on the 15th (1 by A-7s, 1 by the Wilson's 5-inch guns).<sup>2</sup>

#### Crew Moved to Mainland

At 132230Z (5:30 AM), an AC-130 observed a 30-ft craft departing Koh Tang and heading toward the mainland. At 140045Z, when it became light, the craft was identified by a P-3 as a fishing boat, possibly with Caucasians huddled in the bow area, at 10°23'N/103°18'E, about 10 nautical miles ENE of Koh Tang, and heading toward Kompong Som at about five knots. An estimated 40 persons were aboard. One F-4 fired a short 20mm burst in front of the boat to try to stop it. Several CBU-30 RCA passes were made against the vessel, which briefly turned, then resumed course. Multiple CBU-30 passes were made at 140212Z, and warning bursts continued, but the boat maintained course. It was seen docking on the mainland at 140248Z, about one mile south of the main pier in Kompong Som.<sup>3</sup>

---

1. Hist, USSAG/7AF & JCRC, Apr-Jun 75, pp 89-90; material used is (C-GDS-81); Msg (S-GDS-83), CINCPAC to JCS, subj: Orders During SS Mayaguez Operations (U), 191920Z May 75; retransmitted by CINCPAC to CINCPACAF & USSAG/7AF, 201723Z May 75, Doc 272.

2. See note above.

3. Msgs (C-GDS-81), USSAG/7AF to CINCPAC & CINCPACAF, subj: SS Mayaguez SITREP 029 as of 140226Z May 75 (U), 140235Z May 75, Doc 273, (S-GDS-83), PATRON 4 to AIG 7050, subj: Commander's Estimate (U), 140140Z May 75, Doc 274, 140242Z May 75, and 140323Z May 75.

(U) After his release, Captain Miller said in a shipside interview in Singapore that the Thai-crewed fishing boat on which he and his companions were being taken from Koh Tang was followed by American planes for four hours. Warning shots of rockets and machine gun fire came as close as ten feet from the bow. When they saw this was not going to stop the boat, two jets flew over the boat from bow to stern, 70 feet above, and dropped RCA on the boat. Everyone on board vomited, and suffered skin burns. Several were struck by shrapnel. Thirty minutes later, they were gassed a second time. The third engineer, who had a bad heart, passed out for about 20 minutes.<sup>1</sup>

(U) In Washington, meanwhile, the third meeting of the NSC in two days was called by the President on the night of 13 May, to consider options on how to recover the Mayaguez and crew. Secretary Kissinger flew back from Kansas City to attend the meeting, which also included Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger, and Director of Central Intelligence William E. Colby.<sup>\*</sup> President Ford was awakened at 2:25 AM (140625Z) and again at 5:20 AM (140920Z) on the morning of the 14th for reports on the incident. He also talked with Schlesinger again at 7 AM.<sup>2</sup> By then, the final moves had been decided.

---

*\*Author Roy Rowan described the mood of the meeting: "Kissinger was emphatic on the use of force. . . . The Pueblo seizure was on everybody's mind. . . . Kissinger wanted whatever action was taken to be read clearly by the North Koreans as well as by the Cambodians. He argued that if Cambodia used the Mayaguez crew the way North Korea had used the Pueblo crew, it could radically deteriorate the American position in the rest of Asia. Secretary Schlesinger, on the other hand, stressed the need to recover the ship and punish the Cambodians, but was less eager to use the Mayaguez incident as an example for Asia and the world. President Ford was concerned that once the decision to use force was made, it be sufficient to assure military success of the operation. . . . Said the President: '. . . I felt it would be far better to take strong action even though the odds might be against us. It was far better than failing and doing nothing.'" (Rowan, The Four Days of Mayaguez, pp 141-42.)*

1. New York Times, 18 May 75, p 19.
2. Baltimore Sun, 14 May 75, p 1.



Thai Reaction

(U) At about the same time, in Bangkok, Thai Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj said his country would not permit bases there to be used for military action against Cambodia. He charged that the arrival of the Marines was "a violation of Thai sovereignty." The government issued a protest note to Chargé d'affaires Edward E. Masters\* on the 14th, which said:<sup>1</sup>

*It is recalled that on May 13, . . . the Prime Minister informed the Chargé. . . that Thailand does not wish to become involved in the dispute between the United States and Cambodia over the seizure of the vessel Mayaguez, and that Thailand will not permit her territory to be used in connection with any action that might be taken by the United States against Cambodia.*

*On May 14, . . . the Thai Government learned that the United States Government had sent some elements of its marine forces into Thailand as part of its reaction against Cambodia. The Thai Government considers that this action by the United States is not consistent with the goodwill existing between Thailand and the United States. And unless these forces, which have entered against the wishes of the Thai Government, are withdrawn immediately, the good relations and cooperation existing between Thailand and the United States would be exposed to serious and damaging consequences.\**

---

\*Newly confirmed Ambassador Charles S. Whitehouse was arriving in Bangkok the same day, and being greeted by a small group of student demonstrators.

+The Marines, of course, were not withdrawn until the operation was completed less than two days later. However, every effort was made to speedily remove them from Thailand once the outcome became known. Some observers felt that the official Thai reaction was necessitated by domestic political considerations, and many Thai privately lauded the swift and positive American action. A U.S. note delivered to the Thai Government on 19 May, expressing regret over the misunderstandings created by use of Thai bases for the recovery operation, was accepted as an apology and the incident was considered closed.

1. New York Times, 15 May 75, p 1.

Decision Made to Effect Recovery

At 140750Z, on the basis of a JCS message of 140645Z, CINCPAC instructed COMUSSAG to prepare a detailed plan for the following actions:1

- a. Designate USMC GSF personnel to constitute Mayaguez boarding party and embark in Harold E. Holt. Do not embark before first light.
- b. Helo landing assault with USMC GSF to seize/occupy Koh Tang island.
- c. Sink all Cambodian small craft in the target areas of Koh Tang, Poulo Wai, Kompong Som, and Ream.
- d. In coordination with SAC ADVON, B-52 strikes against Kompong Som harbor and Ream airfield. Guam-based B-52s and tankers will be utilized in above planning.
- e. Full coverage/recce of the area of operations (CINCPAC 132346Z May 75 and CINCPAC 140325Z May 75 pertain).
- f. Use of BLU-82 to clear Koh Tang island LZs for assault troops.\*

In planning for these actions, "maximum emphasis" was to be placed on the Coral Sea for close air support, and "minimum reliance" on Thai-based strategic and tactical air. In addition, authority was granted to sink boats attempting to leave or enter the Koh Tang area.

---

\* The 374 TAW, Clark AB, transported six BLU-82 weapons to U-Tapao, and had them rigged aboard six C-130s by 141930Z. Four were subsequently launched. One BLU-82 was dropped from 8,000 ft on Koh Tang at 151132Z, using the AWADS (adverse weather aerial delivery system) on-board computer for guidance. (Previous drops during the Vietnam conflict were guided by ground-based radars.) The impact point was off the target, a trail complex near the center of the island, where troop reinforcements were seen. (Msg (C-GDS-81), 374 TAW to CINCPACAF/ CINCPAC, subj: Mission Commander and Aircrew BLU-82 Report (U), 201030Z May 75, Doc 275.)

1. Msg (TS-GDS-85), CINCPAC to COMUSSAG, subj: SS Mayaguez Operations (U), 140750Z May 75, Doc 276.

With inputs provided by the Navy and Marine Corps, COMUSAG/7AF came up with a final plan at 141730Z. The objective was "to seize the SS Mayaguez and conduct military operations to influence the outcome of U.S. initiatives to secure release of the ship's crew." Up to 625 Marines would be lifted, in up to five waves of USAF CH-53 and HH-53 aircraft, from U-Tapao to Koh Tang beginning at sunrise on 15 May (approximately 142300Z). The first wave would consist of 11 helicopters. Eight would insert approximately 175 Marines on the island and three would simultaneously land a Marine platoon of about 40 troops, plus a nucleus crew of six Military Sealift Command (MSC) volunteers from the USNS Greenville Victory at Subic Bay and six USN personnel, an EOD team, and an Army linguist, on the Holt for later boarding of the Mayaguez. The crew would move the ship under its own power or have it towed by the Holt out to sea.<sup>1</sup>

Subsequent waves of helicopters would insert the remaining Marine GSF onto Koh Tang to secure the island. Approximately three hours after the occupation of Koh Tang, B-52s from Guam would strike Ream airfield and the ports of Kompong Som and Ream. If required, however, Navy tactical air would be used in lieu of B-52s. Approximately 1,000 Marines were in place at U-Tapao for the operation.\* The Holt and the guided missile destroyer USS Henry B. Wilson were already in the area and proceeding to the vicinity of Koh Tang. The Coral Sea was expected to be within operating range to accommodate the plan. USAF tactical aircraft would continue to operate from Thai bases. Continuous coverage of the area would be provided by A-7s, F-4s, and F-111s during daylight, and by F-111s and AC-130s at night.<sup>2</sup>

---

\* Actually, ten MAC C-141 flights had lifted 1,095 Marines from Kadena and 131 from Cubi Point to U-Tapao by 140650Z. Six additional C-141 sorties hauled 118.3 short tons of cargo from Kadena to U-Tapao for the Marines. (Hq PACAF Battle Staff Summary as of 2400W 13 May 75 (S-GDS-83), 14 May 75.)

1. Msg (TS-SPECAT-GDS-85), USSAG/7AF to JCS, subj: Mayaguez/Koh Tang Planning (S), 141730Z May 75 (in 3 sections), Doc 277.

2. Ibid.

Tactical aircraft and naval gunfire strikes were authorized to attack and destroy all Cambodian small naval craft within 25 nautical miles of Koh Tang, Poulo Wai, Kompong Som, and Ream (but excluding Vietnamese territory), and provide close air support of the GSF. Use of BLU-82 15,000-lb bombs was authorized to clear landing zones. COMUSSAG/7AF emphasized that "all forces must be aware of the fact that the primary purpose for conducting ground operations is to secure the safe release of U.S./third-country national prisoners [several of the crewmen were not U.S. citizens]. Actions which will unduly jeopardize this objective are to be avoided."<sup>1</sup>

At 142111Z, CINCPAC told COMUSSAG that the thinking at JCS had changed, and B-52 strikes might not be ordered after all. Instead, tactical USAF air from Thai bases and USN air from the Coral Sea might be used. The tactical air strikes would be applied after the occupation of Koh Tang island, said CINCPAC.<sup>2</sup> The USSAG plan of 141730Z, with slight modifications, was approved by CINCPAC at 142112Z.<sup>3</sup>

Thirty minutes later, at 142142Z, the ACJCS ordered execution of the USSAG plan to effect recovery of the Mayaguez and crew.<sup>4</sup>

Another execute message from the ACJCS, at 142203Z, ordered the commencement of cyclic strike operations from the Coral Sea against selected targets in the Kompong Som area, with first time over target (TOT) to be at 150045Z (7:45 AM). This was expected to coincide with the estimated time of capture of the Mayaguez. First sorties were to be armed reconnaissance strikes, with

- 
1. Msg (TS-SPECAT-GDS-85), USSAG/7AF to JCS, subj: Mayaguez/Koh Tang Planning (U), 141730Z May 75 (in 3 sections), Doc 277.
  2. Msg (TS-GDS-85), CINCPAC to COMUSSAG, CINCPACFLT & CINCPACAF, subj: TacAir Strikes (U), 142111Z May 75, Doc 278.
  3. Msg (TS-GDS-85), CINCPAC to JCS & USSAG/7AF, subj: Mayaguez/Koh Tang Planning (S), 142112Z May 75, Doc 279.
  4. Msg (S-GDS-83), JCS to CINCPAC & CINCSAC, subj: Khmer Seizure of Mayaguez (U), 142142Z May 75, Doc 280.

aircraft and military watercraft as the principal targets. Subsequent flights were to make maximum use of precision guided munitions to attack targets of military significance.<sup>1</sup>

Recovery of the Mayaguez and Crew. The first wave of 11 helicopters (6 HH-53s and 5 CH-53s) launched from U-Tapao in a tight group between 142114Z and 142125Z.<sup>2</sup> Three of the HH-53s (Jolly Green 11, 12, and 13) arrived at dawn over the Holt, which was holding 12 miles northwest of Koh Tang, and deposited their troops on the deck. The helipad on the ship could not support the full weight of the large helicopters, and unloading was done from a partial hover. By 142330Z, offloading of the 65 men of the boarding party was completed, and the Holt swiftly closed in on the Mayaguez at 25 knots.<sup>3</sup>

A flight of three A-7Ds dropped RCA (16 CBU-30s) on the freighter at 150014Z, to disable anyone still on board. The Holt then nudged alongside at 150025Z (7:25 AM) and the Marines, wearing gas masks and led by Maj. Raymond E. Porter, USMC, stormed aboard three minutes later, pirate-style (see photo, Fig 2). They found the ship had just been abandoned. The Mayaguez was declared secure at 150122Z. The MSC crew then boarded to try to start the engines, as the Holt prepared to tow the freighter out of territorial waters. She was put under tow at 150258Z.<sup>4</sup>

---

1. Msg (S-GDS-83), JCS to CINCPAC, subj: Khmer Seizure of Mayaguez (U), 142203Z May 75, Doc 281.

2. Msg (S-GDS-83), 56 SOW to CINCPACAF, et al., subj: SS Mayaguez Operation (U), 142245Z May 75.

3. Msg (S-GDS-83), CINCPACFLT to CINCPAC, subj: Khmer Seizure of Mayaguez Final SITREP (U), 171727Z May 75, retransmitted by CINCPACFLT to CINCPACAF, 172247Z May 75, Doc 282; Msg (C-GDS-81), USSAG/7AF to CINCPAC & CINCPACAF, subj: SS Mayaguez SITREP 039 as of 150128Z May 75 (U), 150215Z May 75, Doc 283; Hist, USSAG/7AF & JCRC, Apr-Jun 75, pp 93-94 (material used is S-GDS-83).

4. See note above.

Meanwhile, at 150235Z, a Navy P-3 sighted a small boat heading toward Koh Tang, with what appeared to be about 30 Caucasians on board, waving white flags. The boat was still some 13 nautical miles from the island, about half-way from the mainland.<sup>1</sup> It was quickly intercepted by the Wilson, which also prematurely radioed that "approximately 30 members of the crew" were on board.<sup>2</sup> This was shortly corrected by another report from the Wilson, at 150308Z, when all 40 crew members were taken on board.<sup>3</sup> COMUSSAG confirmed this with a message at 150340Z to all concerned, including the White House Situation Room, that the ship's master and his entire crew were safely recovered.<sup>4</sup> (See photo, Fig 3.)

(U) A debriefing report followed from the Wilson, five minutes later, saying the whole crew of 40, plus five Thai fishermen, were recovered from the fishing boat. The pickup occurred at 10°23'N/103°14'E, about seven nautical miles northeast of the battle then underway on the Koh Tang beaches. Captain Miller said all were in good condition, and no one had been mistreated.<sup>5</sup>

(U) Miller emphasized to his debriefer on the Wilson that one condition for his release was to be the cessation of bombings. He then wanted to get back on his ship, get the "reefers" going to save the refrigerated cargo, and continue his voyage to Sattahip. At 150600Z, the crew was back aboard the Mayaguez and "lighting off," after the three-day interruption. The Thai fishermen requested fuel and provisions, in order to sail their

- 
1. Msg (S-GDS-83), PATRON 4 to AIG 7050, subj: Commander's Estimate (U), 150258Z May 75, Doc 284.
  2. Msg (C-GDS-81), USSAG/7AF to CINCPAC & CINCPACAF, subj: SS Mayaguez SITREP 041 as of 150308Z May 75 (U), 150325Z May 75, Doc 285.
  3. Msg (S-GDS-83), PATRON 4 to AIG 7050, subj: Commander's Estimate (U), 150327Z May 75, Doc 286.
  4. Msg (C-GDS-81), USSAG/7AF to CINCPAC & CINCPACAF, subj: SS Mayaguez SITREP 042 as of 150314Z May 75 (U), 150340Z May 75, Doc 287.
  5. Msg (U), USS Henry B. Wilson to NMCC, et al. [subj: recovery of Mayaguez crew], 150345Z May 75, Doc 288.

boat back to Thailand, and this was provided by the Holt.<sup>1</sup>

By 150845Z (3:45 PM), the Mayaguez was underway on her own power. At 151200Z, she was 30 nautical miles northwest of Koh Tang, at 10°40'N/102°48'E, when ordered by her owners to alter course south for Singapore instead of Sattahip.\*<sup>2</sup>

(U) Captain Miller and his crew later related events of their last day of captivity which finally led to their release. After surviving their hazardous trip from Koh Tang to the mainland in the Thai fishing boat on the morning of the 14th, they pulled into Kompong Som harbor before noon. Several hours later, the boat, with everyone still on board, was moved to an island about 10 nautical miles to the west (Koh Rong Sam Lem). There, an interpreter for the Kompong Som district commander stressed the need for Miller to radio the military from his ship, and call off the air attacks on the Cambodian boats. Miller, in turn, said if they were released, there would be no need for the air strikes. The crew spent the night on the island, and the next morning, at 6:30 (142330Z), the High Command in Phnom Penh authorized their release. The crew and Thai fishermen headed out to sea an hour later, and author Roy Rowan found this to be the moment of irony.<sup>3</sup>

---

\*The Mayaguez arrived in Singapore on 170800Z May 75, and back in Hong Kong on 23 May, where its loaded containers were removed, to be transferred to another ship bound for Sattahip. The Thai Government requested that the Mayaguez never again visit Bangkok or Sattahip because it was concerned about relations with its new Communist neighbors. The ship was to be transferred to the Hong Kong - Subic Bay run by its owners.

1. Msg (U), USS Henry B. Wilson to NMCC, et al. [subj: recovery of Mayaguez crew], 150435Z May 75, Doc 289.

2. Msg (S-GDS-83), USS Harold E. Holt to NMCC & CINCPAC, subj: Commander's Estimate, 152011Z May 75.

3. Rowan, The Four Days of Mayaguez, p 206.

At 7:29 AM (150029Z), the very minute United States Marines were seizing his ship, and Gerald Ford was being informed by Henry Kissinger of Phnom Penh's intent to release it anyway, the captain and crew of the Mayaguez were setting out in a fishing boat from the Cambodian shore. . . .

Offer to Release Ship. (U) The Cambodian offer to release the Mayaguez was made in a shortwave radio broadcast from Phnom Penh that began at 142307Z and ended at 142326Z. It was summarized and translated into English by 150006Z. Nine minutes later, the message reached the White House, but it was 150029Z (8:29 PM EDT--Washington time) before Secretary Kissinger could pass the word to President Ford.<sup>1</sup> The Cambodian broadcast by Information Minister Hu Nim, which was also picked up by the wire services, said they would release the ship, but gave no specific timetable for doing so. It also did not state that the crew would be released at the same time. The relevant part of the broadcast, as translated by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), a U.S. Government agency, was as follows:<sup>2</sup>

Regarding the Mayaguez ship, we have no intention of detaining it permanently and we have no desire to stage provocations. We only wanted to know the reason for its coming and to warn it against violating our waters again. This is why our coast guard seized this ship. Their goal was to examine it, question it and make a report to higher authorities who would then report to the Royal Government so that the Royal Government could itself decide to order it to withdraw from Cambodia's territorial waters and warn it against conducting further espionage and provocative activities. This applies to this Mayaguez ship and to any other vessels,

- 
- p 1.
1. Washington Post, 15 May 75, p 1; Baltimore Sun, 16 May 75,
  2. New York Times, 16 May 75.



like the ship flying Panama flags that we released on 9 May 1975.\*

Wishing to provoke no one or to make trouble, adhering to the stand of peace and neutrality, we will release this ship, but we will not allow the U.S. imperialists to violate our territorial waters, provoke incidents in our territorial waters or force us to release their ships whenever they want, by applying threats.

The President, who was in the State Dining Room for a party honoring Premier J.M. den Uyl of the Netherlands, read the message and directed Press Secretary Ron Nessen to issue a statement calling on Cambodia to release the crew members as well as the ship (not knowing, of course, that the crew was already released and on its way out to sea). The U.S. reply, which was broadcast by shortwave and also put out by the wire services, said:1

We have heard a radio broadcast that you are prepared to release the SS Mayaguez. We welcome this development if true. As you know, we have seized the ship. As soon as you issue a statement that you are prepared to release the crew members you hold, unconditionally and immediately, we will promptly cease military operations.

This statement was read during a 9:15 PM (150115Z) press conference by Nessen, at which time he also revealed that the Marines had landed on Koh Tang.

---

\*A Panamanian vessel was detained on 7 May 75 and released the next day. Other incidents in which Cambodian forces interfered with foreign vessels during May were: 2 May--7 Thai fishing boats with 27 fishermen were seized and later released; 4 May--a South Korean freighter was fired upon but escaped capture; 13 May--the Eastern Grand, also of Panamanian registry, was fired on and detained for two hours before being released; 13 May--the Swedish vessel Hirado was fired on by an armed patrol boat. (Msg (U), SecState to AmEmb Tokyo, subj: Khmer Communist Actions Against Foreign Vessels in the Gulf of Thailand, 231613Z May 75; retransmitted by CINCPAC to JCS, et al., 232136Z May 75, Doc 290 .)

1. Washington Post, 15 May 75, p 1; Baltimore Sun, 16 May 75, p 1.

(U) Not only did the Cambodians err in not broadcasting their offer the night before (when the decision was reportedly made to release the ship), but also in neglecting to mention the crew's release. It may have been obvious to the Cambodians that ship and crew were one, but to the Americans, who were more concerned with the lives of the crew, this was a most serious omission. According to Captain Miller,<sup>1</sup> final authorization for their release was received by radio from Phnom Penh via Kompong Som at 6:30 AM (142330Z), and they embarked an hour later. By then, recovery operations were already underway, and a day-long battle would ensue.

Assault on Koh Tang\* (U) The Marine GSF commander, Lt. Col. Randall W. Austin, had reconnoitered Koh Tang in an Army U-21 aircraft late in the afternoon on the 14th to select suitable helicopter landing zones. The island was about four miles long, up to a mile wide, and covered with dense jungle vegetation (see photo, Fig 4). All habitation appeared to be on the northern tip of the island; so it was felt that if the crew were being held captive on Koh Tang, this was the most likely area. Two LZs on the northern peninsula were selected: an open beach on the eastern shore, and a small cove on the western shore (see photo, Fig 5). The plan was to land Marines on both shores, effect a link-up, and sweep north to the tip of the island.<sup>2</sup>

Eight of the helicopters, carrying some 170 Marines, were to land in pairs, simultaneously on both shores. No landing zone preparation by air strikes or

---

\*Three Hq PACAF monographs, on file at the Office of PACAF History, provide additional details on insertion and extraction operations at Koh Tang: Assault on Koh Tang (S/NOFORN) by Capt Thomas D. DesBrisay, 23 Jun 75; "Fourteen Hours at Koh Tang" (FOUO) by DesBrisay, 29 Dec 75 (manuscript); A Chronology of the Mayaguez Affair (S/NOFORN) by Capt Michael A. Wehrell, 23 May 75.

1. Rowan, The Four Days of Mayaguez, pp 187, 206.  
 2. Hist, USSAG/7AF & JCRC, Apr-Jun 75, p 91; material used is unclassified.

naval gunfire was made, for fear of injury to Mayaguez crewmen who might still be on the island. Thai-based USAF F-4s, A-7Ds, and F-111s were overhead to provide close air support, if required. The first pair of helicopters were to insert 40 Marines on the western beach, and the second, third, and fourth pairs were to follow with insertions on the eastern beach. All helicopters were then to return to U-Tapao for a second load of Marines. A total of 450-600 troops were to be inserted on the island.<sup>1</sup>

The first CH-53, Knife 21, flown by Lt. Col. John H. Denham, 21 SOS commander, inserted its load of 20 Marines on the west beach at about 142300Z (6:00 AM). While Knife 21 was offloading, the Cambodians opened fire and knocked out one of the engines. Denham attempted to lift off, but could only skip out over the water. About 3/4-mile offshore, the craft settled in the water and rapidly sank. The pilot and two other crew members were rescued by another CH-53, but the flight mechanic, SSgt. Elwood E. Rumbaugh, disappeared in the water. Knife 22 was unable to land on the west beach because of the intense ground fire, and was forced to return to Thailand with heavy battle damage.<sup>2</sup>

On the other side of the peninsula, insertion on the eastern LZ was also delayed by ground fire. Knife 23 was hit and downed on the beach, but all five USAF crewmen and 20 Marines aboard survived, and established a defensive position in the treeline just inland from the crash site. They were pinned down here most of the day, with 1st Lt. John P. Lucas, co-pilot, using a survival radio to call in air strikes against enemy positions. Because of the heavy fire, these 25 men were to be the only forces landed on the eastern beach.<sup>3</sup>

---

1. Capt Thomas D. DesBrisay, Hq PACAF DCS/P&O (S/NOFORN), Assault on Koh Tang (U), 23 Jun 75, p-4.

2. Msg (S-GDS-83), 56 SOW to CINCPACAF [subj: after-action report (U)], 191200Z May 75, Doc 291.

3. Capt Michael A. Wehrell, Hq PACAF DCS/Intel (S/NOFORN), A Chronology of the Mayaguez Affair (U), 23 May 75; Capt Thomas D. DesBrisay, Hq PACAF DCS/P&O (FOUO), "Fourteen Hours at Koh Tang," (manuscript), 29 Dec 75; DesBrisay, Assault on Koh Tang.

At about 142310Z, the fourth helicopter, Knife 31, with 26 aboard, took intensive ground fire while approaching the east LZ, exploded, and crashed in shallow water just off the beach (see photo, Fig 6). The CH-53 burned immediately, while its 13 survivors swam away from the island under heavy fire from the shore. The survivors were picked up several hours later by the Wilson, a mile offshore.<sup>1</sup> Among the fatalities was 2d Lt. Richard Vandegeer, co-pilot.

The other four helicopters of the first wave completed successful insertions on the west beach, after being diverted from the other side of the peninsula. In four hours, only 131 Marines had been landed, and some of the first wounded were brought out by returning helicopters. Offensive action continued on Koh Tang until 150308Z, when the crew of the Mayaguez was picked up by the Wilson. In an attempt to stabilize the situation, 100 reinforcements were brought in and landed on the western beach by the second cycle of helicopters at 150500Z (12:00 noon).<sup>2</sup>

Extraction operations were then begun, and at about 151115Z, the 25 men from Knife 23 were finally rescued from the eastern beach. After this, extraction of the main force from the west beach was accomplished by the USAF helicopters, under intense ground fire. A total of 231 Marines had been inserted on the island, and the last man was officially reported off after dark at 151310Z (8:10 PM). The Marines and helicopters had been under nearly continuous enemy fire for over 14 hours. During this period, they were supported by nearly 75 USAF tactical air strike sorties.<sup>3</sup>

---

1. Capt Michael A. Wehrell, Hq PACAF DCS/Intel (S/NOFORN), A Chronology of the Mayaguez Affair (U), 23 May 75; Capt Thomas D. DesBrisay, Hq PACAF DCS/P&O (FOUO), "Fourteen Hours at Koh Tang," (manuscript), 29 Dec 75; DesBrisay, Assault on Koh Tang.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

(U) The Wilson, which moved in to within one mile of the island after rescuing the Mayaguez crew, also provided naval gunfire support. Her crew fired a total of 157 rounds of 5-inch shells at enemy positions while covering the Marine extraction.<sup>1</sup> The Holt, after escorting the Mayaguez to international waters, also returned to Koh Tang at 151030Z, to assist in the extraction.

Earlier, the attack aircraft carrier USS Hancock\* and its task group had been ordered to the scene from Subic Bay, Philippines, at 8:00 AM local on the 14th (140000Z) as a contingency force. The task group was configured as an amphibious ready group/marine amphibious unit (ARG/MAU), with Marine helicopters on board.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 35 hours later, at 151058Z, CINCPAC instructed the Hancock, still en route, to be prepared to launch the maximum number of helicopters, with troops aboard, to arrive at Koh Tang at first light on the 16th.<sup>3</sup> However, since the GSF extraction was completed on the night of the 15th, these reinforcements were not needed.

Navy Air Strikes on the Mainland. [REDACTED] Meanwhile, the attack aircraft carrier Coral Sea, with Rear Adm. R.P. Coogan, Commander Task Force 77 on board, was scheduled to be within striking range of the Cambodian mainland by dawn on the 15th. At 150005Z (7:05 AM), she launched her first strike cycle. One minute before the planned TOT (150045Z), however, the JCS rescinded their strike authority and ordered the aircraft to return to the carrier. The Coral Sea recovered her first cycle at 150130Z. Then, at 150118Z, the JCS again ordered execution of these strikes,

---

\*The Hancock was in a familiar role, having just participated in the helicopter evacuations of Phnom Penh on 12 Apr and Saigon on 29 Apr.

1. Msg (U), USS Henry B. Wilson to AIG 7050, subj: Commander's Estimate, 151803Z May 75, Doc 292.

2. Msg (S-GDS-83), JCS to CINCPAC, subj: USS Hancock (U), 132310Z May 75, Doc 293.

3. Msg (S-GDS-83), CINCPAC to JCS, subj: Orders During SS Mayaguez Operations (U), 191920Z May 75; retransmitted by CINCPAC to CINCPACAF & USSAG/7AF, 201723Z May 75, Doc 272.

and the second cycle of two A-6s and five A-7s (plus support aircraft) was launched at 150145Z. Estimated TOT was 150205Z, and the target was Ream Airfield. Several aircraft, including two C-47s and one C-46, were destroyed, and others, including a C-47, were damaged. In addition, the runway was cratered, and the POL storage area, hangars, and several other buildings were destroyed or damaged.<sup>1</sup>

The carrier then launched her third cycle of two A-6s and six A-7s, plus support aircraft, at 150320Z, with TOT at 150345Z. At the Ream Naval Facility, a large POL tank and several buildings, including a barracks complex, were destroyed, while the two large warehouses at the Kompong Som Port Facility suffered moderate structural damage. A large warehouse in the railroad yard received light external damage. The Kompong Som Refinery had POL tanks holed and damaged.<sup>2</sup>

The fourth and final cycle of two A-6s and four A-7s, plus support aircraft, was launched at 150445Z.<sup>3</sup> Ten minutes later, however, the CJCS ordered CINCPAC and CINCSAC to cease offensive operations and withdraw from the area:<sup>4</sup>

*Immediately cease all offensive operations against  
Khmer Republic related to seizure of Mayaguez.  
Disengage and withdraw all forces from OpArea  
as soon as possible consistent with safety/self  
defense. Report when disengagement completed  
and all forces clear of territorial waters.*

---

1. Msgs (S-GDS-83), JCS to CINCPAC, subj: Khmer Seizure of Mayaguez (U), 150044Z May 75, Doc 294 and 150118Z May 75, Doc 295; Msgs (S/NOFORN-GDS-83), CTG 77.5 to AIG 914, subj: OP-4/001, 150347Z May 75, Doc 296 and OP-4/002, 150530Z May 75, Doc 297; Msg (S-GDS-83), CINCPACFLT to CINCPAC, subj: Khmer Seizure of Mayaguez Final SITREP (U), 171727Z May 75; retransmitted by CINCPACFLT to CINCPACAF, 172247Z May 75, Doc 282.

2. Msg (S-GDS-83), CINCPACFLT to CINCPAC, 171727Z May 75; Msg (S/NOFORN-GDS-83), CTG 77.5 to AIG 914, subj: OP-4/003, 150809Z May 75, Doc 298.

3. Msg (S-GDS-83), CINCPACFLT to CINCPAC, 171727Z May 75.

4. Msg (S-GDS-83), JCS to CINCPAC & CINCSAC, subj: Khmer Seizure of Mayaguez (U), 150455Z May 75, Doc 299.

No targets were assigned to the fourth cycle, but a patrol boat was sunk by an A-7 near Koh Tang. All aircraft were recovered by the carrier at 150635Z.<sup>1</sup>

Still closing Koh Tang at 30 knots, the Coral Sea cancelled further launches of strike aircraft, and prepared to support extraction operations. By 151100Z (6:00 PM), she was within 10 nautical miles of the island. Meanwhile, two Navy SH-3G Sea King helicopters (capable of carrying about 12 passengers), were launched at 150910Z to help extract the GSF, but they were not used. The first USAF helicopter landed on the carrier deck at 150840Z, with battle damage, and the last landed at 151320Z.\*<sup>2</sup>

Termination of Operations. When he learned that the Marine extraction had been completed, CINCPAC, in a telephone call to CINCPACAF, CINCPACFLT, and COMUSSAG/7AF at 151345Z, ordered the termination of all operations in support of the recovery of the Mayaguez and crew.<sup>3</sup> A half-hour later, Admiral Gayler sent a stirring "well done" message to all participants.<sup>4</sup>

*I have never seen, and I never expect to see, an operation more determinedly carried out under tougher circumstances. Starting from scratch and terribly short of time, you put together a team of Air Force, Marines, and Navy that did the job at a time of profound national need. To the commanders, greatest credit. To the marines, the chopper crews, the airmen, and all the magnificent combat team, my greatest admiration and respect.*

---

\*The USS Coral Sea sailed directly from the Koh Tang area to Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippines. Her visit to Australia was cancelled. (Telecon, CINCPACFLT Historian)

1. Msg (S-GDS-83), CINCPACFLT to CINCPAC, 171727Z May 75.

2. Ibid.

3. Msg (C-GDS-81), CINCPAC to USSAG/7AF, CINCPACFLT, CINCPACAF & JCS, subj: Mayaguez/Koh Tang Operation (C), 152330Z May 75, Doc 300.

4. Msg (U), CINCPAC to CINCPACFLT, CINCPACAF, COMUSSAG/7AF, CGFMFPAC & COMSEVENTHFLT, subj: Mayaguez Operation, 151415Z May 75.

*We mourn our dead and grieve for our wounded,  
and shine with pride for our country. Well done.*

(U) Many other congratulatory messages were received, from the President on down, but the one that must have had the most meaning to the USAF helicopter crewmen was from the rescued Marine GSF:1

*To us, "semper fidelis" (always faithful)  
extremely meaningful. Your actions Mayaguez/  
Koh Tang epitomized that meaning.*

*With deepest sincerity, to the "Jollies" and  
"Charlies" (HH/CH-53s)--we're with you, any-  
where, any time, any mission. Thanks.*

(U) At a Honolulu news conference held at 151900Z, less than six hours after the Marines were extracted from Koh Tang, Admiral Gayler said the mere threat of U.S. force would not have been sufficient to obtain release of the ship and crew. "I have direct evidence to the effect that the release was related to their concern about our firm action," said Gayler. As for the air strikes, themselves, CINCPAC's view was:2

*The purpose in attacking the aircraft at Ream on the field and facilities that supported them, as well as the gunboats that were there at sea, was essentially to disarm any potential interference, and, appropriately it seems to me, to inhibit their capability to pull another outrage like this with their gunboats on the high seas. Parenthetically, the airplanes we destroyed are ones which had fallen into their hands; they were really American property, anyway.*

---

1. Msg (U), CTG 79.9 to 56 SOW, subj: "Recognition and Appreciation, 170115Z May 75.

2. Msg (U), CINCPAC to ASD/PA, subj: Admiral Gayler's News Conference, 160414Z May 75, Doc 301.



### Marines Depart Thailand

Before the helicopter extraction began, CSAF had responded to pressures to remove the Marine battalion from Thailand as soon as possible by requesting MAC, at 150442Z, to send eight C-141 transports immediately from Clark to U-Tapao for this purpose.<sup>1</sup> Then, at 151433Z (only an hour after the Koh Tang operation was completed), JCS sent an execute message to CINCPAC, confirming a previous telephone call, ordering the immediate removal of all USMC personnel deployed to Thailand for the Mayaguez operation. "Highly desirable," said JCS, "that no, repeat, no, Marines be left in Thailand first light on 16th." (At that time, it was already past 9:00 PM on the 15th.) If necessary, personnel were to be moved first, and cargo pallets and vehicles later.<sup>2</sup>

The last of the 1,000 Marines did depart Thailand before daybreak, at 152110Z (4:10 AM on the 16th), on a MAC C-141 bound for Kadena. Some 58 pallets of cargo were scheduled to be flown out aboard a C-5, and 22 vehicles in six C-141s, all on the 16th.<sup>3</sup>

### Statistical Summary<sup>4</sup>

(U) Personnel Status:\* Total 15 killed in action (11 USMC, 2 USAF, 2 USN); 3 missing in action (all USMC); 49 wounded in action (41 USMC, 6 USAF, 2 USN).

---

\*Does not include one CH-53 lost during deployment from Nakhon Phanom to U-Tapao, in which 23 USAF personnel were killed.

1. Msg (S-GDS-83), CSAF to MAC, subj: Reposition Airlift to U-Tapao (U), 150442Z May 75.

2. Msg (S-GDS-83), JCS to CINCPAC & CSAF, subj: Marine Retrograde (U), 151433Z May 75, Doc 302.

3. Msg (S-GDS-83), MAC to CSAF & JCS, subj: Retrograde Airlift of Marines U-Tapao to Kadena (S), 152255Z May 75, Doc 303.

4. Hist, USSAG/7AF & JCRC, Apr-Jun 75, pp 99-101; material used is unclassified. For details, see also Msgs (S-GDS-83), CINCPAC to JCS, subj: Mayaguez/Koh Tang After Action Report (U), 180210Z May 75, Doc 304; (S-GDS-83), CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, subj: Khmer Seizure of Mayaguez (U), 172340Z May 75, Doc 305; (S-GDS-83), CINCPACFLT to

(U) Aircraft Battle Losses/Damage: \* Total 3 lost (all USAF CH-53); 3 severe damage (2 CH-53, 1 HH-53); 11 minor damage (1 CH-53, 6 HH-53, 2 RF-4C, 1 F-4D, 1 A-7D).

(U) USAF Tactical Air Sorties: Total 279 (162 F-4, 16 RF-4C, 42 A-7D, 45 F-111A, 14 AC-130).

(U) USAF Support/Helicopter Sorties: Total 102 (10 CH-53, 17 HH-53, 4 OV-10, 8 HC-130, 8 EC-130, 9 C-130, 46 KC-135).

(U) USN Attack Sorties: Total 29 (15 A-6/7 strike, 14 A-6/7 close air support).

(U) USN Support Sorties: Total 36 (16 F-4 barrier combat air patrol, 2 RF-8 reconnaissance, 2 F-4 escort, 8 KA-6/7 tanker, 4 E-1 airborne early warning, 4 SH-3G helicopter evacuation).

---

\*Does not include one CH-53 lost during deployment from Nakhon Phanom to U-Tapao.

4. (cont) CINCPAC, subj: Khmer Seizure of Mayaguez Final SITREP (U), 171727Z May 75, retransmitted by CINCPACFLT to CINCPACAF, 172247Z May 75, Doc 282, (S-GDS-83), 56 SOW to CINCPACAF, subj: Khmer Seizure of Mayaguez (U), 171600Z May 75, Doc 306, (S-GDS-83), 347 TFW to CINCPACAF, subj: Khmer Seizure of Mayaguez (U), 170545Z May 75, Doc 307, (S-GDS-83), 388 TFW to CINCPACAF, subj: Khmer Seizure of Mayaguez (U), 170920Z May 75, Doc 258, (S-XGDS-3), 388 TFW to CINCPACAF, subj: AC-130 Activities During Khmer Seizure of Mayaguez (U), 290915Z May 75, Doc 308, (S-GDS-83), 432 TFW to CINCPACAF, subj: Khmer Seizure of Mayaguez (U), 170805Z May 75, Doc 309, (S/NOFORN-GDS-83), 3 ARRG to AIG 8712 [subj: final SITREP], 201200Z May 75, Doc 310, (C-GDS-81), 56 SOW to CINCPACAF, subj: Battle Damage HH/CH-53C Helicopters (U), 170730Z Jun 75, Doc 311, (C-GDS-81), 56 SOW to CINCPACAF, subj: Effectiveness of OV-10 FAC Control During Mayaguez Operation (U), 231110Z May 75, Doc 312.

UNCLASSIFIED

459

Cost of the Mayaguez Operation

(U) The rescue of the Mayaguez and its crew cost the United States \$9.5 million, according to Department of Defense figures released by the House Appropriations Committee in late June 1975. The DOD said three USAF helicopters worth \$6.3 million were shot down, air and sea operations cost \$1.9 million, Air Force operations and transportation cost \$800,000, and \$500,000 worth of bombs and ammunition were used.<sup>1</sup>

(U) For PACAF, incremental costs (additive to the approved program) for the operation totaled \$853,000, including \$352,000 for operations and maintenance and \$501,000 for ammunition.<sup>2</sup>

Critique

(U) There were many critics, both at home and abroad, of the strong U.S. military moves taken to secure release of the ship and crew, most calling it "overreaction," "gunboat diplomacy," or even "compensation for defeats" recently suffered in Indochina. Generally, however, sentiment in the country was overwhelmingly in support of President Ford's handling of the situation. Furthermore, as Newsweek pointed out, the successful operation achieved another important objective outside the United States. Initial intelligence reports from abroad suggested that the President had achieved his purpose, "heartening allies and putting adversaries--especially the trigger-happy North Koreans--on notice that the U.S. is not after all a paper tiger."<sup>3</sup>

(U) In Honolulu, the CINCPAC, Admiral Gayler, said at a news conference that he was "very pleased" with the outcome of the operation, and "with the performance of

---

<sup>1</sup>. Washington Post, 26 Jun 75, p 3.

<sup>2</sup>. Staff Summary Sheet (U), Hq PACAF DCS/Comptroller, subj: Cost of Mayaguez Incident, 20 May 75; Msg (S-GDS-83), CINCPACAF/AC to CSAF/ACB, subj: Cost of Mayaguez Incident (U), 210030Z May 75, Doc 313.

<sup>3</sup>. Newsweek, 26 May 75, p 17.

UNCLASSIFIED

460

everybody in the Air Force, Marine, and Navy team that did the job on very short notice, with very little preparatory time, in a thoroughly professional way, with minimum force and quite successfully."<sup>1</sup>

(U) To commanders and staff people nearer the scene, reflecting on the operation, more basic issues were involved. Then-USSAG/7AF Deputy Chief of Operations Plans, USAF Col. Robert C. Reed: "The command and control functions and command relationships employed in the previous two operations [evacuations of Phnom Penh and Saigon] were primarily the same, and even worked more smoothly, despite the time-compressed nature of the planning and execution phases of the operation." Regarding this evaluation, Maj. Gen. Charles C. Pattillo, Vice CINCPACAF, who was aware of the confusion that existed at U-Tapao, commented, "Hogwash!" He did agree, however, with Reed's complaint that "the constant request for detailed information to be furnished higher headquarters was a definite hindrance to [all three operations]. . . ."<sup>2</sup> This was a common misgiving, voiced many times previously, but, because these operations were of such great significance (and being aided by modern-day communications), every major decision was made in Washington--half a world away.

(U) The commander of a major unit directly involved in the rescue operation, Col. Harry A. Goodall of the 56 SOW, had a more candid, but probably more typical, view:<sup>3</sup>

*From the outset, the Mayaguez operation was characterized by the reinvention of the wheel. We had "old" intelligence. An airborne assault was planned without prep of landing zones by TacAir. Also, Forward Air Control (Slow FAC) aircraft were not tasked to control TacAir. The crux of the issue is that we had a number*

- 
1. Msg (U), CINCPAC to ASD/PA, subj: Admiral Gayler's News Conference, 160414Z May 75, Doc 301.
  2. Ltr (U), Hq 12AF/DOO to AFSHRC/HQA, subj: End-of-Tour Report (Col Robert R. Reed, USSAG/7AF Dep Ch Opns Plans, Jan-Jun 75), undated.
  3. Ltr (U), 56 SOW/CC to AFSHRC/HQA, subj: End-of-Tour Report (Col Harry A. Goodall, Cdr 56 SOW, Feb-Jun 75), 30 Jun 75.

*of time-proven tactics founded on basic doctrine that we failed to follow. The lesson learned is that we did not use lessons learned. The mission was successful because of the heroism and dedication of the [helicopter] crews. We succeeded in spite of ourselves.*

Traditional landing zone preparation, however, could not be accomplished, because it was believed at the time that a part of the Mayaguez crew might still be on the island, in spite of the knowledge that a fishing boat with about 40 persons aboard, some of whom looked like Caucasians, had escaped to the mainland on the morning of the 14th.

(U) As for the unexpectedly heavy resistance on Koh Tang, Admiral Gayler said, the day after the withdrawal, "When we went in there, we estimated that it [the Cambodian force] might be between 100 and 200. From the nature of the resistance, I'm inclined to think that there were more."<sup>1</sup> The truth will probably never be known. If the actual size, firepower, and determination of the defenders had been properly anticipated, it is doubtful that such a precarious landing would have been attempted.

In the area of command and control, an investigation by CINCPAC in November 1975 appeared to lead to the conclusion that USSAG/7AF was partly at fault in not having a specific individual in overall charge at U-Tapao. Although COMUSSAG/7AF had been given operational control over the Marine GSF at U-Tapao and over the 13AF units in Thailand, he did not establish a central command post there, with one man in charge. USSAG had no designated intelligence officer at U-Tapao; hence, the IPAC estimate of the defending force on Koh Tang was not passed on to the GSF commander.<sup>2</sup> Other evidence of the presence of a large force of defenders was available, however, as picked up by AC-130 sensors.

---

1. Msg (U), CINCPAC 160414Z.

2. Msg (C-GDS-81), SSO Bangkok to AFSSO PACAF (Col Robert E. Patterson, C/S USMACTHAI to Col Frank J. Mackey, Asst DCS/Intel PACAF [subj: Koh Tang intelligence (U)], 070820Z Nov 75, Doc 314.

(U) The assault on Koh Tang was indeed a costly operation: all the U.S. casualties and helicopter losses were suffered during this phase of the operation. In the testimony of the Mayaguez crew,<sup>1</sup> it was evident that their release was a direct result of the USAF air strikes of the 14th on the Cambodian naval craft. The captors' interpreter told them that "four ships were destroyed and one hundred friendly people were wounded" in the attacks. They were apparently released on the condition that they would go back to the ship and call off the air strikes on the Cambodian boats. The Cambodians, of course, were unaware of the even larger air strikes on the mainland and of the Koh Tang landing which were planned for that very morning. Had the crew been released and picked up a few hours earlier, these final operations would surely have been called off.

The General Accounting Office (GAO), auditing arm of the U.S. Congress, made a complete investigation (beginning in August 1975) of the facts surrounding the Mayaguez incident, and prepared a report for the Congress. A draft of the report was made available for CINCPAC's review, and, after coordination with component commanders, he submitted his comments to the JCS on 13 February 1976. "[The] report," said Admiral Gayler, "is generally factual on military aspects and with some important exceptions, reasonably fair minded. With full benefit of hindsight we could have done a number of things better." He added, philosophically, "Life is like that, and there is no reason we should not acknowledge it." Four important criticisms were expressed or implied in the draft report, and CINCPAC's response was given:<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. Rowan, The Four Days of Mayaguez, p 188.
  2. Msg (S-GDS-84), CINCPAC to JCS, subj: Draft GAO Report on Mayaguez (U), 131338Z Feb 76; retransmitted by CINCPAC to CINCPACFLT & CINCPACAF, 131801Z Feb 76, Doc 315. Also, draft Msg (S-GDS-84), CINCPAC to JCS, subj: Draft GAO Report on Mayaguez (U), 121035Z Feb 76, Doc 316; and Msg (S-GDS-84), CINCPACAF/CV to CINCPAC, subj: Draft GAO Report on Mayaguez (U), 130515Z Feb 76, Doc 317.

- a. First, that available intelligence on opposition, was not agreed, and not made available to the ground commander. This is true, but only in part. DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency] and IPAC did agree on probable opposition, and their estimate was quite close to what we now believe. This estimate was given wide distribution but by an unusual set of circumstances, did not reach the ground assault commander. It did reach the chopper commander and others. The ground commander's own final pre-assault estimate was not that far off. CINCPAC has directed a feedback system which should now ensure acknowledgment of critical intelligence by commanders directly concerned.
- b. Second, that the whereabouts of the crew should have been more accurately ascertained. Here we have two problems in countering this basically unwarranted criticism. The writers have no feel for the compression of time and the problems of communication that existed. Examination of the photography and the detailed debrief of crews that was conducted in the aftermath was not available. And much of the weight of evidence suggesting that the crew was on Koh Tang came from an intelligence source of higher classification which indicated KC intent to take them there. Apparently the KC later changed their mind. It remains for us to insist that the judgments made were valid in the light of the information then available.
- c. Third, that the timing of the operation was unnecessarily hurried, resulting in going with inadequate force and intelligence. This criticism is ill founded on two counts. We were attempting to get the men back before anything happened to them, or they were transported into the inaccessible interior. And it is a well known principle that to move first, and earliest, yields a commander great advantage over an opponent by denying him time to improve his position.
- d. Finally, the purpose of the targeting on the mainland is challenged. The intent here was clear: to deny Cambodia the capability to interfere either by sea or air. The targets were approved, military, and give or take a little more quarterbacking, appropriate.

In spite of these criticisms, the GAO report generally acknowledged that the operation was a success.

(U) No one could contest the successful outcome of the recovery operation. President Ford even termed it a "turning point" in his Presidency, putting it to author Roy Rowan in this way:<sup>1</sup>

*Although we were successful in the evacuation of Phnom Penh and Saigon, it was sort of a subdued feeling that we had accomplished something in those two instances, but to have an affirmative action go right, gave me a great sense of confidence. It did not only ignite confidence in the White House, among the people here, it had an electrifying reaction as far as the American people were concerned. It was a spark that set off a whole new sense of confidence for them too. We had gone through a very, very difficult eight months [actually, nine months of the Ford Presidency]. This sort of turned the corner and changed the course.*

#### Chronology, 12-15 May 1975

<u>GMT</u>	<u>Local</u>	
120720Z	2:20 PM	- Warning shots fired at <u>Mayaguez</u> .
120903Z	4:03 PM	- Washington notified of seizure.
121140Z	6:40 PM	- President informed.
121200Z	7:00 PM	- Reconnaissance aircraft ordered by NMCC to search for ship; closest naval vessels ordered to proceed to area.
121300Z	8:00 PM	- <u>Mayaguez</u> stopped for night, 9 NM NE of seizure point, near island of Poulo Wai.
121430Z	9:30 PM	- Ship spotted on Navy P-3 radar.
121600Z	11:00 PM	- First meeting of National Security Council in Washington at noon (EDT).
121812Z	1:12 AM	- Carrier <u>Coral Sea</u> diverted to area; ARG alerted on Okinawa.

---

1. Rowan, The Four Days of Mayaguez, p 223.



GMT	Local	
130116Z	8:16 AM	- <u>Mayaguez</u> underway from Poulo Wai; P-3 drew AA fire.
130625Z	1:25 PM	- Ship dropped anchor 36 NM NE of seizure point, off island of Koh Tang.
130720Z	2:20 PM	- First PACAF F-4s launched from Udorn, followed by A-7s and F-111s from Korat.
130900Z	4:00 PM	- A-7D flight expended first rockets fore and aft of <u>Mayaguez</u> as signal for ship to stay.
131024Z	5:24 PM	- Fishing boat observed, probably moving crew from ship to Koh Tang.
131341Z	8:41 PM	- JCS authorized use of riot control agents (RCA) and/or gunfire necessary to disable <u>Mayaguez</u> , to discourage movement to mainland.
131430Z	9:30 PM	- CH-53 crashed while deploying from NKP to U-Tapao; all 23 USAF personnel aboard killed.
131610Z	11:10 PM	- JCS confirmed orders to move all USAF CH/HH-53s in Thailand, 75 security police, and 2 Marine platoons from the Philippines to U-Tapao. Marine battalion landing team on Okinawa alerted.
131748Z	12:48 AM	- COMUSSAG/7AF plan completed for landing SP boarding force from USAF helicopters onto <u>Mayaguez</u> and retaking control.
131905Z	2:05 AM	- JCS ordered Koh Tang isolated, by turning back boats attempting to approach or leave area.
131912Z	2:12 AM	- JCS ordered Marine battalion airlifted by MAC from Kadena AB to U-Tapao.
132051Z	3:51 AM	- CINCPAC ordered Marines to be used for reboarding, instead of USAF SPs.
132144Z	4:44 AM	- IPAC intelligence estimate of Cambodian force on Koh Tang sent to all concerned.
132230Z	5:30 AM	- AC-130 sensors pick up boat departing Koh Tang and heading toward mainland. (Later identified as Thai fishing boat on which <u>Mayaguez</u> crew was taken from island to Kompong Som.)
132245Z	5:45 AM	- CINCPAC authorized AC-130 to fire near 3 patrol boats attempting to leave Koh Tang.

466

GMT	Local	
132310Z	6:10 AM	- CINCPAC ordered attack aircraft carrier Hancock and its task group to sail from Subic Bay NB at 8:00 AM local, as contingency force.
140014Z	7:14 AM	- CINCPAC ordered fleeing patrol boat sunk.
140022Z	7:22 AM	- A-7Ds sank first Cambodian patrol boat.
140045Z	7:45 AM	- P-3 spotted fishing boat, possibly with Caucasians on deck, 10 NM ENE of Koh Tang and heading toward Kompong Som; estimated 40 persons aboard. USAF aircraft unsuccessfully attempted to stop boat with gunfire, rockets, and RCA.
140248Z	9:48 AM	- Fishing boat reached Kompong Som harbor. (Later revealed that boat, with all still aboard, moved to island 10 NM to west, where crew spent third night of captivity.)
140404Z	11:04 AM	- CINCPAC, with JCS approval, ordered all boats around Koh Tang sunk; subsequently, 7 destroyed by USAF strikes.
140645Z	1:45 PM	- JCS/CINCPAC instructed COMUSSAG to prepare detailed plan for Marine boarding party, assault on Koh Tang, and B-52 strikes on Kompong Som and Ream.
140650Z	1:50 PM	- Last of 16 MAC C-141 flights lifted 1,095 Marines from Kadena AB and 131 from Cubi Point NAS to U-Tapao, plus 118 ST of cargo.
140930Z	4:30 PM	- USMC ground security force (GSF) commander in aerial reconnaissance of Koh Tang.
141730Z	12:30 AM	- USSAG/7AF recovery plan completed.
142111Z	4:11 AM	- USN TacAir strikes from <u>Coral Sea</u> substituted for B-52s from Guam.
142112Z	4:12 AM	- USSAG/7AF plan approved by CINCPAC.
142125Z	4:25 AM	- First wave of 11 USAF helicopters launched from U-Tapao, with Marines aboard.
142142Z	4:42 AM	- JCS ordered execution of USSAG/7AF plan.
142203Z	5:03 AM	- JCS ordered commencement of <u>Coral Sea</u> strikes.

GMT	Local	
142300Z	6:00 AM	- First 20 Marines inserted on W beach of Koh Tang by CH-53 Knife 21, which then crashed in water 3/4-mile off-shore; 3 crew rescued, 1 drowned. Knife 22 driven off by ground fire before offloading; forced landing on Thai coast.
142300Z	6:00 AM	- CH-53 Knife 23 shot down on E beach; all 25 survive and set up defensive position.
142310Z	6:10 AM	- Knife 31 shot down just off E beach; 13 survivors swam out, and were later rescued by guided missile destroyer Wilson; 13 lost.
142320Z	6:20 AM	- CINCPAC directed launch of C-130s from U-Tapao with BLU-82 bombs.
142326Z	6:26 AM	- Cambodia offered to release <u>Mayaguez</u> in Phnom Penh radio broadcast.
142330Z	6:30 AM	- Crew received word of release, but unknown to U.S.
142330Z	6:30 AM	- HH-53s dropped reboarding party on deck of destroyer-escort <u>Holt</u> , 12 NM NW of Koh Tang.
142330Z	6:30 AM	- First USAF close air support strikes on Koh Tang, made by A-7Ds; followed by F-4s, F-111s, and AC-130s.
142340Z	6:40 AM	- Fifth helicopter, Knife 32, inserted 13 Marines on W beach.
150005Z	7:05 AM	- <u>Coral Sea</u> launched first mainland strike cycle, while still steaming toward area.
150014Z	7:14 AM	- A-7Ds dropped RCA on <u>Mayaguez</u> .
150020Z	7:20 AM	- Sixth and seventh helicopters inserted 56 more Marines on W beach.
150025Z	7:25 AM	- <u>Holt</u> came alongside <u>Mayaguez</u> and Marines prepared to board.
150029Z	7:29 AM	- <u>Mayaguez</u> crew and 5 Thai set out to sea in fishing boat, unknown to U.S. President received word of Cambodian offer to release ship.
150044Z	7:44 AM	- Navy strike authority rescinded, one minute before TOT; aircraft ordered to return to carrier.

<u>GMT</u>	<u>Local</u>	
150115Z	8:15 AM	- U.S. broadcast answer to Cambodia, demanding release of crew, as well as ship.
150118Z	8:18 AM	- JCS again ordered execution of naval air strikes.
150121Z	8:21 AM	- Thirteen survivors of Knife 31 crash picked up by gig from Wilson.
150122Z	8:22 AM	- Boarding party declared <u>Mayaguez</u> secured.
150205Z	9:05 AM	- Second <u>Coral Sea</u> cycle struck Ream Airfield.
150235Z	9:35 AM	- P-3 sighted fishing boat about 13 NM from Koh Tang; reported about 30 Caucasians apparently on board.
150258Z	9:58 AM	- <u>Mayaguez</u> put under tow by Holt.
150308Z	10:08 AM	- <u>Wilson</u> picked up crew 7 NM NE of Koh Tang; confirmed all 40 rescued.
150310Z	10:10 AM	- Eighth helicopter finally inserted last of 111 Marines of first cycle on W beach, after being driven off four times by ground fire. Air-refueled twice by HC-130.
150345Z	10:45 AM	- Third <u>Coral Sea</u> cycle struck Ream Naval Facility and Kompong Som Port, Railroad Yard, and Refinery.
150356Z	10:56 AM	- Three C-130s, with BLU 82s armed, air-borne from U-Tapao.
150412Z	11:12 AM	- CINCPAC instructed USSAG to get Marines in position for extraction.
150442Z	11:42 AM	- MAC C-141s ordered to U-Tapao, to remove Marine battalion.
150445Z	11:45 AM	- Fourth <u>Coral Sea</u> strike cycle launched, but no targets were assigned; sank one patrol boat. Carrier had steamed to within 85-90 NM S of Koh Tang by this time.
150500Z	12:00 Noon	- Second cycle of 4 helicopters brought in 100 Marine reinforcements to W beach.
150600Z	1:00 PM	- <u>Mayaguez</u> crew returned to ship.
150635Z	1:35 PM	- <u>Coral Sea</u> recovered all of its strike and support aircraft.
150646Z	1:46 PM	- Fourth C-130 airborne, with armed BLU-82.
150840Z	3:40 PM	- First USAF helicopter landed on <u>Coral Sea</u> , with battle damage.

<u>GMT</u>	<u>Local</u>	
150845Z	3:45 PM	- Mayaguez underway on own power, escorted by Holt.
151025Z	5:25 PM	- CINCPAC authorized drop of one BLU-82 near center of island.
151030Z	5:30 PM	- Holt returned to Koh Tang, to join Wilson in supporting Marine extraction.
151030Z	5:30 PM	- Helicopter evacuation of GSF ordered.
151100Z	6:00 PM	- Coral Sea closed to within 10 NM of Koh Tang and prepared to take in helicopters.
151115Z	6:15 PM	- Eastern beach extraction completed by HK-53, under intense enemy fire.
151132Z	6:32 PM	- One BLU-82 dropped. Doubt expressed about completing extraction before nightfall; boat extraction considered.
151150Z	6:50 PM	- CINCPAC concurred with USSAG and GSF commander's recommendation to continue with helicopter extraction.
151210Z	7:10 PM	- Last A-7D close air support strike covering extraction from Koh Tang.
151310Z	8:10 PM	- Last of Marine GSF extracted by helicopter from western beach; supported by AC-130 gunfire in darkness.
151320Z	8:20 PM	- Last helicopter landed on Coral Sea.
151345Z	8:45 PM	- CINCPAC ordered all operations ceased.
151621Z	11:21 PM	- Last aircraft, one ABCCC C-130 and one AC-130 gunship, departed Koh Tang area after search for survivors called off.
152110Z	4:10 AM (16 May)	- Last of Marine battalion landing team departed U-Tapao for Kadena.